DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 676 HE 027 518

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TITLE Bilingual Cash Machines, Multicultural Campuses and Communities of Difference.
INSTITUTION National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, University Park, PA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Sep 93
CONTRACT R117G10037
NOTE 19p.; A version of this paper was presented at Buffalo State University (Buffalo, NY, September 1993).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Change; Community Influence; Community Psychology; Cultural Differences; Cultural Influences; *Cultural Pluralism; *Diversity (Institutional); Educational Environment; Ethnic Groups; *Higher Education; Personal Narratives; Philosophy
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Community; *Diversity (Student)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges to higher education and the academic community in light of increasing ethnic and cultural diversity. Knowledge is not objective, neutral and separate from the knower but knowers are all implicated in the ways they construe knowledge. Consequently a minority student shares her own story of immigrating to the United States from Argentina and of attending institutions of higher education as a member of an ethnic minority. She explores the challenges that diversity present to the dominant culture and community and the problem of how to construct a community centered on differences. Emancipatory knowledges provide a framework and language to build community on the basis of diversity. Emancipatory knowledges force individuals to make sex, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity and other differences central to the construction of community. They direct individuals and institutions to examine the particular ways in which political, cultural, and institutional practices support a community centered on differences. Emancipatory knowledges make people aware that to build community, institutions must be transformed. Emancipatory knowledges are centered on the analysis of texts as social and historical constructions that reflect the author's subjectivity. (Contains 38 references.) (JB)

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Bilingual Cash Machines, Multicultural Campuses and Communities of Difference[1]

by Estela Mara Bensimon

Knowledge and theories are generated from the standpoint of particular interests, locations, and life experiences. Unfortunately, we have been schooled to believe that knowledge is objective, neutral, and separate from the knower. This is not true. We are all implicated in the ways we construe knowledge; therefore, I am going to violate the principle of keeping the personal separate from the public and share something of my life that shapes the way I view community. I will speak about community as a feminist, a Latina, and an advocate of critical multiculturalism who wishes to provoke a thoughtful reconsideration of the prevailing views of the social, cultural, and intellectual breakdown that prompt and shape appeals for the restoration of normative community.

I was born in Argentina and immigrated to the United States with my parents and younger brother in the early sixties. There were many reasons that prompted my parents to give up what at the time seemed to me an idyllic life and move to a country that we knew only from the movies. As my parents tell it now, the urge to come to the United States was motivated in part by an article written by Anderson Imbert, a professor of Spanish at Harvard, in which he portrayed student life in the great public and private universities of this country. Something about this article,

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[1] A version of this paper was delivered as a speech at Buffalo State University, NY, September 1993.

PROJECT R117G10037
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which they read in the context of the political instability of Argentina, made my parents dream of someday sending my brother and me to one of those great colleges. In 1980, I entered a doctoral program at Teachers College, Columbia University. That same year, my brother began an internship in general surgery at Columbia University's Presbyterian Hospital. For my mother having a son and a daughter both pursuing doctorates (although his was considered more legitimate than mine) in one of America's oldest and most prestigious universities was a momentous event, which she described in a letter to her brother as "living the ultimate immigrant dream."

In the early 60's, when we arrived in the United States, between 94 and 96 percent of the students in college were white. At the time, a number of public and private universities did not admit Blacks at all, and some of the most prestigious institutions did not admit women. Of course there were some prestigious institutions for women only, but these were far fewer in number than those exclusively for males. Colleges tended to be white male enclaves for students and faculty. Dramatic changes have taken place in the past thirty years. Now, twenty percent of all college students are African American or Latino, and fifty-five percent are women. Male-only colleges are practically nonexistent. The number of women faculty members has increased from twenty percent to thirty percent (Scott, 1992).

There are also other remarkable changes. For example, when I go to the Chase Manhattan ATM machine on the corner of 64th St. and Broadway in New York City where I live and insert my PLUS

bank card, the screen asks me, "Do you want to proceed in English/Ingles?" or "Do you want to proceed in Spanish/Espanol?" I find that amazing. In Chinatown, ATM machines greet the customer in Chinese. On the West Coast ATM machines are multilingual; in addition to speaking English and Spanish, they also speak Chinese and Japanese. I like the idea of multilingual ATM machines; regardless of how politically insignificant this may be, they are a symbol of the legitimacy of Spanish; an acknowledgement of the Latino presence--culturally and economically.

As one might expect, some people take offense with the messages in foreign languages. I recently heard a radio talk show personality rage against Sacramento's multilingual ATM machines. To me, they symbolize a recognition of the linguistic, ethnic, racial, and cultural differences that characterize the urban metropolis. To the radio personality, however, the bilingual ATM machines threaten nationhood and the survival of a common culture. Her opposition to the recognition of languages other than English in the public sphere is based on the logic of assimilation. She is saying, "If they want to live here they have to learn English." She is also saying, "<u>They</u> have to make the effort to fit in; why should <u>we</u> change to accommodate them?"

As the United States becomes more diverse and more vulnerable in the world economic market, symbols that convey an image of a coherent and universal American identity assume great importance. In cities and states in which authentic English-speaking Americans appear to be an endangered species, the

movement to make English the official language has gained momentum. In California, according to a series of articles in the New York Times, Angelenos openly express concern over the possibility of being outnumbered by people from alien borderland cultures.

Higher education is also being transformed by the diversity of the student body. Last year, I spent several months doing an ethnographic study of an urban college, at which students of the same ethnicity congregated in clearly designated territories. The lounge area in the main administration building belonged to the Indian students; the ground floor of the social sciences building was occupied by a sizable contingent of Spanish-speaking students; the African American students assembled around the offices of the Pan African Student Organization. The fragmentation evident at this institution is commonplace in urban campuses throughout the nation and has generated the feeling that we are experiencing a crisis of community.

So what do bilingual cash machines and campuses divided into separate ethnic spheres have to do with the crisis in community? My point is simple. When campuses and neighborhoods were homogeneous, community was taken for granted; and like everything that is taken for granted, it was invisible. Bilingual cash machines and the onslaught of diverse people clamoring for recognition of their knowledge and the power to define themselves reveal the fragility of community, at least in its traditional manifestation as a whole and seamless unit. Diversity and the challenges posed by the growing numbers of Others impel us to

talk about community. The desire for community is in some significant ways a defense against the challenge diversity presents to established forms of knowledge, power, and organization.

Those idyllic communities of scholars that provided my parents with a vision of what life could be like in the United States no longer exist. What were once bastions of white males are now more like the college in which I spent time last year. There has also been an explosion of new knowledges--women's studies, cultural studies, lesbian and gay studies, Chicana and Chicano studies--and the formation of intellectual identity groups--Eurocentrists, Multiculturalists, Africanists, Feminists, Deconstructionists, Post-Colonialists, etc. These enclaves are not nearly as powerful as the media's sensationalist accounts of the political correctness movement lead one to believe. Even so, there is no denying that the "action" in higher education today is at the margins--just walk into any good bookstore and see the abundance of works with unorthodox titles: Loose Canons (Gates, 1992), Living Dangerously Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference (Giroux, 1993), Talking Back: Thinking Feminist/Thinking Black (hooks, 1989), The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy (MacCannell, 1991), Building Communities of Difference (Tierney, 1993), and the Social Construction of Lesbianism (Kitzinger, 1987). At one time, works like these might have occupied a couple of shelves; now there are enough to fill entire sections to themselves. There can be no doubt that formerly subjugated knowledges have attained legitimacy.

Scholars such as the philosopher Cornel West (1993), the cultural critics bell hooks (1989, 1990) and Michael Dyson (1993), the literary critic Henry Louis Gates, and the pioneer of Gay and Lesbian Studies, Martin Duberman are familiar not only to readers of the Yale Journal of Criticism or Cultural Critique, but also to those who are informed by the more popular media. These dissident scholars are also assuming the long neglected role of the public intellectual and have become familiar figures in the pages of Tikkun, the Nation, the New York Times, and, yes, even the Village Voice.

Just as subjugated knowledges are gaining legitimate status, the present generation of African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian students, unlike their predecessors who paved the way into higher education ten or twenty years ago, now are numerous enough to form a substantial nucleus and demand recognition for their own histories in the traditional curriculum. Their presence challenges many of the prevailing assumptions about what constitutes knowledge and how it is produced (Scott, 1992).

According to a New York Times article entitled "Separate Ethnic Worlds Grow on Campus," "As American campuses grow more racially and ethnically diverse, many students are creating even more complete worlds of their own, in which they live, study, and socialize only with others like themselves" (DePalma, 1991, p. 1). It is precisely this concern, that campuses are being splintered into ethnic identity groups, that has intensified the calls for community. For example, Ernest Boyer, president of the

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is disturbed by what he perceives to be an increase in "separatism and tribalism." The implications of this balkanization frighten him. Boyer asks, "If humanism and communal understanding can't happen on a college campus, how in the world can it happen on city streets?" (DePalma, 1991, p. 1).

Fear of "separatism and tribalism" translates into a model of community that is based in the logic of sameness or commonality. The ideal of community based on unity and consensus, Parker Palmer (Edgerton) points out, is derived from a theory of knowledge based on rationality and objectivity. This theory suggests that community can be experienced in universal ways and that it is made possible by objective standards which enable us to develop a consensus as to what constitutes intellectual knowledge and what does not; what qualifies as culture and what does not; what counts as literary achievement and what does not; and what is considered a great book and what does not.

I am concerned that a view of community grounded in the logic of sameness and the ideal of a common culture validates ethnocentrism and intellectual elitism. In his book Multi-Culturalism, the communitarian philosopher Charles Taylor quotes a famous author as having declared, "When the Zulus produce a Tolstoy, we will read him" (1992). This cannot be regarded as a reasonable response to campus debates on the expansion of the Western European canon. In addition to being arrogant, the statement also reveals a serious fallacy. The author's

invocation of a universal "we" ignores the fact that historically the first person plural pronoun has been used to represent a culture in which only men, white men at that, qualify as rational and autonomous agents. I am aware that the universal "we" no longer think of women as irrational or of colonized people as primitive; however, my concern is that the ideal of community based on a common culture can be traced to a system of thought that reduced women and members of colonized races and cultures to the category of Other.

When we speak of community in the same breath that we voice fear of tribalism because Puerto Rican students wish to live together in the same dormitory floor, or because African American students like to sit together in the cafeteria, or because gay and lesbian students demand the same rights as other student groups, then we are construing community along exclusionary lines. We are also forgetting that self-segregation did not come about naturally; self-segregation was and continues to be in many places a matter of survival.

I am not suggesting that this is a malevolent conspiracy. What I am saying is that we can easily be seduced by the image of harmony and calmness projected by the ideal of community based in the logic of sameness. Instead, we should be conceptualizing community based in the logic of differences (Tierney, 1993). As long as we construe community in the logic of sameness, we will focus on superficial manifestations of community breakdown, such as the self-segregation of minorities. The logic of difference directs our attention to the root causes of segregation and makes

us more fully aware of the embededdness of segregation in everyday institutional practices.

Emancipatory Knowledges

If the traditional view of community based on an objectivist theory of knowledge is inadequate for the post-canonical and post-modern university, what theory of knowledge enables us to think of community from the standpoint of differences? I believe that one of the biggest problems with the mainstream communitarian movement is that it completely disregards the critical literature that problematizes the concept of community.

If we are to create a framework and language of community that is centered on differences, we have to turn to a body of knowledge that has been ignored for the most part in traditional, and liberal, constructions of community.

Critical, feminist, post-colonial views of community[2]--what I refer to as emancipatory knowledges--provide us with a framework and language to build community on the basis of difference in the following ways:

1. Emancipatory knowledges force us to make sex, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other differences central to the construction of community. Simply put, this means that in the day-to-day life of the university, we must consider the impact of practices on different groups and the implications of these practices for community as a whole. For example, it is

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[2]A brief appendix lists works that are representative of emancipatory knowledges.

disingenuous to call for community building in a university where there is an institutionalized pattern of racial and sex bias in high level appointments.

2. Emancipatory knowledges direct us to examine the particular ways in which political, cultural, and institutional practices support a community centered on differences. This means increasing general awareness that assumptions of universality are anti-community. For example, denying health, pension, and other benefits to heterosexual and homosexual domestic partners that are accorded to heterosexual married couples undermines the idea of community. To build community, we have to work assiduously to eradicate inequalities. In order to do this, we must look and listen for "differences."

3. Emancipatory knowledges make us aware that to build community, we must transform our institutions. We cannot prepare students to live in a multicultural society or to work on behalf of social justice within institutional structures organized on the basis of monocultural/monovocal values and norms.

4. Emancipatory knowledges direct us to become border crossers. That is to say, we struggle "to understand Otherness in its own terms" (Giroux, 1992, pp. 23-24). Border crossing is made possible by removing the obstacle erected by power, authority, membership in dominant coalitions, or control over resources.

Border crossing is a particularly difficult achievement when one is in a position of power and part of the consensus. But by saying that it is difficult for such individuals, I do not mean to imply that they are incapable of rising to the occasion. My point is that community building requires that those whose culture and knowledge are reaffirmed continuously must be willing to become border crossers. For this to happen, I believe that we need to rethink our theories of administrative leadership, our organizational structures, our pedagogical practices, and our definitions of knowledge.

5. Emancipatory knowledges are centered on the analysis of texts "as social and historical constructions" (Giroux, 1992) that despite claims to objectivity reflect the author's subjectivity. This suggests that to build community, we first must learn to approach community as a cultural text. The concept of community as a cultural text makes us consider institutional structures not in terms of standards of managerial efficiency but rather in terms of who has a voice and who is silenced, who has power and who is disempowered, who is privileged and who is disadvantaged.

6. Finally, emancipatory knowledges tell us that community building cannot take place without a thorough and critical reconsideration of the community as it exists.

In sum, traditional knowledges create a framework and

language that depict the ideal community as a place in which individuals recognize others as they recognize themselves (Young, 1990). To verify that this view prevails in our understanding of community, one need only look at theories of student retention which assume the identity of a student is fixed. Or our theories of faculty socialization which treat faculty members as if they were a deracinated, neuter, and neutral category. Traditional knowledges promote an ideal of community that is unable to accommodate plurality, differences, and different realities (Young, 1990). The traditionalists' ideal of community is a conceptual straitjacket. By denying plurality, differences and different realities community building appears to require the erasure of Otherness. Perhaps this is the reason that so much of the literature concentrates on a long list of ills that have caused the crisis of community but makes few recommendations on how to build community. To avoid this pitfall, I propose **cultural leadership practices** for building community.

Cultural Leadership Practices[3]

What does this orientation to community mean in relation to my role as a professor, or as a department chair, or a dean, or a counselor, or a vice president, or a student, or my role as president of the college? In response, I suggest three possible points of departure:

1. Establish a President's colloquium on community to

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[3]Cultural leadership practices in higher education are reflected in the following works: Communities of Difference by William G. Tierney; Redesigning Collegiate Leadership by Estela Mara Bensimon and Anna Neumann.

involve representatives from the full spectrum of institutional roles in ongoing dialogues about building community on the basis of differences. Such a colloquium might provide a variety of activities, including speakers, reading groups, panel discussions, and collaborative projects. However, rather than having speakers who talk at audiences, it is important to design activities that are conducive to conversation. The topics that such a colloquium might include are: "What can administrative leaders do to encourage community building?" "What view of community is implicit in our curriculum?" "What prevents us from talking about dissenting views of community?" "What communities are empowered by institutional structures, practices, and policies?" "What communities are disempowered?"

2. Transform teaching and learning practices to involve students in encounters with Otherness, so that they will become border crossers. Furthermore, leadership needs to be reconceptualized as a bordercrossing practice.

3. Lastly, evaluate institutional practices and policies through the lens of differences.

I conclude by paraphrasing Patrick Hill, "We need to reconceive and restructure institutions so that community building cannot possibly happen without the contributions or even the presence of the currently marginalized" (1991, p. 45).

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